



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Floor Speech of U.S. Senator Max Baucus Urging Passage of Hurricane Health Relief

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) U.S. Senator Baucus, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, delivered the following speech on the Senate floor today urging his colleagues to support a health care relief package designed to meet health and welfare needs of Hurricane Katrina victims he wrote with Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley.

Yesterday, the House and the Senate passed the tax relief package Senators Grassley and Baucus drafted sending it the president's desk where it is expected to be signed into law later this week.

The floor speech follows:

Floor Speech of U.S. Senator Max Baucus Katrina Health Relief Package

Mr. President, I join the Chairman of the Finance Committee in urging swift passage of our bill, the Emergency Health Care Relief Act. This bill will provide victims of Hurricane Katrina with the health-care that they urgently need. We should pass this bill immediately.

Mr. President, we have seen terrible destruction: more than a thousand dead, a million displaced, hundreds of billions in damage.

Traveling down to the Gulf Coast last week, I saw the havoc that Katrina had wreaked. It is stunning. It is like a war zone. It is worse than the pictures.

At one stop, we went into what was left of a library. Muck and ruin covered books and other library materials. One shiny object caught my eye. I picked up. It was a DVD of the film, "The Perfect Storm."

Among its many consequences, the Hurricane inflicted countless blows to people's health. A third of Katrina evacuees in Houston had injuries or health problems. And more than half of those evacuees were seeking medical care.

The bill that Senator Grassley and I have introduced will provide that care. Our bill will provide temporary Medicaid coverage for Katrina survivors. It will provide for a streamlined application. It will make benefits available right away. And it will provide coverage for up to 5 months, with a possible extension of 5 months.

Pregnant women and children will be eligible for help at higher income levels. And an extended package of mental health services under Medicaid will help survivors deal with the trauma of Katrina.

To support those who have private health insurance, our bill would provide Federal assistance to help individuals to keep their coverage.

Our bill will help alleviate the burden of providing health care. I have been inspired by the sights and stories of health care workers doing all in their power to treat victims. To ensure that these providers are compensated, our bill establishes a disaster relief fund to cover the uncompensated costs that they incur because of Katrina.

Katrina inflicted massive financial losses on the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. For Louisiana and Mississippi, our legislation calls on the federal government to pay 100 percent of Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program costs through 2006. For Alabama, the federal government will pick up 100 percent of these costs in several, particularly-ravaged counties.

Our bill postpones a scheduled decrease in federal Medicaid payments for 2006, to ensure that all states have the means to meet their health-care needs in this trying time.

Our legislation provides immediate access to funds through the TANF program for Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama for 14 months. And it provides these states, as well as states providing services to evacuees, immediate access to the TANF Contingency Fund, a part of the 1996 welfare law that has been hard to use before now.

Our bill eases work-rules and time-limits on aid, so that people can get immediate help. And our legislation provides a federally-funded extension of unemployment benefits for unemployed workers in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. This law will go a long way toward helping Katrina survivors to get back on their feet.

We must act to meet the needs of those whom Katrina has harmed. We must do our part to help this region and its people. And we can do so today, by passing the Emergency Health Care Relief Act.

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